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U.S., Europe File Trade Complaint Against China

By BRIAN BLACKSTONE

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. and the European Union filed separate complaints with the World Trade Organization on Tuesday alleging that China is unfairly benefiting domestic industries by restricting exports of certain raw materials.

The complaints filed with the WTO represent a departure from past allegations by the U.S. and other countries that China is flooding other countries' markets with its exports.

U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk called China's alleged export restraints on raw materials a "giant thumb on the scale" in favor of China's chemicals, steel and aluminum industries, among others, which use those materials.

The raw materials involved in the dispute include bauxite, coke, magnesium, manganese, silicon metal and zinc. China is a top producer of these materials.

The U.S. alleges that by limiting exports on those products through quotas, export duties, licensing and other restraints, China gives an unfair leg up to its manufacturers that use those materials.

China has 10 days to respond to the requests for consultation at the WTO. Last week, China's government defended the restrictions, saying they protect the environment and improve the composition of China's exports. Responding to an email request for comment, the Chinese Embassy in Washington said a response to the complaint should be coming soon.

JSTR officials told reporters that the two complaints filed separately by the EU and the U.S. highlight the importance of this dispute.

EU Trade Commissioner Catherine Ashton said "the Chinese restrictions on raw materials distort competition and increase global prices, making things even more difficult for our companies in this economic downturn."

Mr. Kirk said he hopes the dispute can be resolved through consultation within the WTO process.

The American Iron and Steel Institute, the United Steel Workers and other industry groups released a joint statement praising the Obama administration's decision to pursue a WTO case against China.

"When China joined the WTO in 2001, it committed to removing these restrictions," the groups said.

Mr. Kirk said it does seem somewhat "counterintuitive" that the Obama administration's first WTO complaint involves allegations that China isn't exporting enough.

Traditionally, the complaint from Washington is that China's trade and foreign-exchange policies favor that country's

exporters too much. The U.S. argues that China unfairly benefits in sectors such as metals and chemicals because of the restraints on raw-materials exports.

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